



HOW TO 'BE MORE STRATEGIC'

Ways of 'being more strategic'

1. Ensure that your people have at least a basic understanding of systems thinking. A key aspect is the 'interconnectedness' of everything. Previous UGM briefings on complexity would be a useful starting point.
2. Involve people in strategy development, not only strategy implementation. This kind of exposure will help raise the overall strategic capability of your organisation. It means that more people will be alert to emergent opportunities that arise. You'll also find that people are more committed to implementation.
3. Use 'thinking in time' to help you introduce strategic change that sticks. Your vision for the future focuses effort and energises. Your reflection on the past provides continuity and comfort in the face of change. Your analysis of the present gives clarity of where things are at and what needs to change.
4. Encourage hypothesis-driven business activity. Emphasise the enormous value of asking the right question! 'Being strategic' involves thinking creatively.

'Be more strategic'

Some UGM executive coaching clients ask what to do after being advised to 'be more strategic'. Overcoming initial concerns that the comment was likely a put-down, most remained completely unaware of what they were expected to do differently, to be seen as 'being more strategic'.

The topic also often surfaces in our leadership development and strategy facilitation work, at all levels within the organisation. At senior levels especially, it is interesting to see how often even experienced managers are unable to succinctly explain to their direct reports exactly what it is they see as 'being strategic'. They know (and value) it when they see it, but find it a difficult concept to convey to others.

What does 'being more strategic' really mean?

If you've been challenged to 'be more strategic', or perhaps have made that comment to someone else, stop for just a moment. Imagine you've been asked to describe what 'being strategic' means. Jot down your succinct explanation, one that you feel would make the concept crystal clear to someone who had no idea. As a matter of interest, how long did that take you? Is your definition succinct and crystal clear? Why not try it out on someone to check?

It wouldn't surprise us if you found it reasonably challenging to describe. We've noted that many who are very good at 'being strategic' tend to respond to their context rather instinctively. But, they find their skill rather difficult to verbalise and share with others. Often, they've developed their strategic capability over time – usually with plenty of practise and in the company of others who display aspects of the skill. It's also pretty common for them to have been frustrated in situations where colleagues weren't strategic and outcomes were compromised.

Why the lack of clarity?

Given that most organisations engage in strategy planning and publish their strategies, how is it that there is so much uncertainty around what it means to be strategic? One important reason is because a concerning proportion of 'strategic plans' are not very strategic to start with! Instead, they're more operational-type plans, generated using the tried and tested 'corporate process'. It delivers a high degree of certainty and no unexpected surprises.

Such processes have their place (and value), but only once the strategic heavy-lifting has occurred. They definitely aren't an adequate substitute for a truly strategic process first off. Organisations that use only this form of planning are unlikely to be able to respond effectively to the challenges of a complex economy. At best, they may limp along, always

under severe pressure, never realising their potential. A more likely scenario is that they cease to operate in that form and are either taken over or close down.

Interestingly, while there is plenty written on the topic of strategy, there is substantially less formal research on the topic of 'being strategic'. Perhaps that's because it really is quite difficult to explain. Further, it involves the brain and a lot of intangible cognitive processes. The neuroscience and business management fields haven't, until fairly recently, had very much in common. And, there is still a substantial way to go!

Putting 'strategic' into strategy

Researcher, Dr Jeanne Liedtka, emphasises that although often used in the context of a corporate strategy process, 'being strategic' is essentially an individual activity. Writing just over a decade ago, many businesses had well-developed, formal processes for developing their strategies. But, these strategies were mechanistic, number-crunching operational forecasts. There was seldom much creativity involved, needed to respond to the increasingly complex business environment. Formal strategy processes required individuals, rather than the process, to contribute the truly strategic input.

Liedtka's model of strategic thinking includes five elements. Unsurprisingly, although individual focused, they are nevertheless tightly aligned with business outcomes. First is the requirement for a systems approach – essentially, recognition that elements are often interconnected. Second, strategic intent – which is closely related to purpose - should provide focus and energy. Third, strategic thinking should also incorporate intelligent opportunism – the capacity to detect unexpected, emergent opportunities that inevitably arise as plans unfold. This recognises that any planning is only a snapshot in time. Fourth, strategic thinking is 'thinking in time' – it "connects past, present and future". Finally, it needs to be hypothesis driven. This includes both the creative aspect of hypothesis formulation and the analytical component of implementation and testing.

Helping others to 'be more strategic'

Most who read the UGM briefings are in an executive or managerial role. Accordingly, it would be surprising if 'being strategic' wasn't woven into the fabric of how you operate. You'll no doubt be continually refining your strategic thinking capability, often through subtle insights.

But, less experienced individuals often overlook subtle signals and sometimes miss even the blatantly obvious! An important way to help people gain experience is to share expertise. Are you able to clearly describe what it means to 'be strategic'?